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Cube #347's Excellent Adventure, Part I

*Deja vu: the illusion that one has previously had a given experience
-Webster's New World Dictionary

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Captain Jad Vorezze of the Federation starship Banshee, currently on permanent detachment to Section 31, stared at Captain Velorn, the Vulcan "experience" officer assigned to the ship, in confusion. Eyes behind glasses blinked back to the terminal display on his desk, reading in disbelief, then returned to Velorn, looking for confirmation.

"We've done some weird and downright stupid things for Section 31 before, but this one takes the cake. How did we get this assignment?"

Velorn just looked at Jad like he was being an idiot.

"Yah, right," mumbled Jad as he reread the briefing. "That was a stupid question, wasn't it?"

The assignment under discussion involved a follow-up on classified files involving research on the Borg, accessed many months prior and decrypted using an unknown protocol. One yeoman Tina Jones, liaison officer for Waystation, was the focal point of the interrogation to come, as it was her network userid which was associated with the electronic theft. Included in the files were several medical reports and station logs of Jones describing an odd episode of an alternate personality, namely a Borg one. Weird. Reading between the lines of the various official logs, it almost seemed as if there issues left unsaid, but it was not known how important the unmentioned information might have been.

"So we are going to fly halfway across the Federation to talk with people on Waystation? Aren't there any nearer Section 31 ships?"

"Well, yes, of course there are. And crews that would do a better job too."

"But? There has to be a but in there somewhere."

Velorn looked at Jad suspiciously, obviously trying to determine if the last statement had been innuendo or not. Jad's perfect poker face proclaimed too much innocence. "But enroute to Waystation, there is a little piece of experimental hardware that needs to be tested."

Jad's face almost broke into a delighted smile, then suddenly darkened. "A weapon? No wait...the only reason we would be testing a weapon is that it is unknown if it was safe to use. What is the thing?"

"It is called the BIC protocol...short for Borg Isolation and Containment."

A quick blink of eyes, then thoughtful expression. "I think I heard about that. Wasn't there an incident involving the Secondprize where the weapon in question actually attracted a Borg cube?" Jad stared at Velorn in dawning horror, "If Section 31 really wanted to get rid of us, wouldn't it be easier and more humane to simply have the computer lock helm control and point us towards a star?"

Velorn gave Jad a withering look, very impressive as Vulcan faces weren't really built to demonstrate emotion. "All records of the incident have been examined and it was decided the

cube was a freak anomaly; it will never happen again. Just in case, there were several modifications to the deflector protocols, which would have been made regardless to the subsequent outcome. This will just be more routine testing. Between DS3, where Banshee will be temporarily retrofitted, and Waystation, there is a minor system which can be used for target practice.

"After we leave to DS3, the appropriate files will be uploaded."

Jad looked up at the ceiling of his ready room. "I suppose there is no getting out of this mission, is there?"

"Is there ever? Section 31 owns you, you know."

"Yah, I know."

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Captain regarded the tumbling asteroids in suspicion. Of many shapes and sizes, they chaotically orbited the red dwarf primary, remnants of an old system which had never formed mature planets. Lambda particle bearing ore, bolonite, was plentiful in the uncatalogued system; but the last time Cube #347 had tried to take samples, the sub-collective had found itself in the Alpha quadrant, subjects of a devious Federation plot. Or accident. The consensus had never been particularly clear on that point.

{The trail goes through the system?} asked Captain to Sensors, the insectoid who was the current head of the sensor hierarchy. Sensors gave the electronic equivalent of a sniff of disdain.

{Of course Sensors is sure the backtrack of species #8511 goes through those rocks. Sensors may have lost the [alleyway] for a while, but the quarry stopped for several [rhythm jumps] among the asteroids, allowing the [scent] to build. The nebula is getting close and deviations from straight [curves] is becoming less. Sensors postulates this may be the last [virtuous] fix needed to point the way to the general area of species #8511 homeworld.}

The bolonite was tempting. Very tempting. And if the species #8511 transport had remained here for some time, there must have been a reason why; the only objects of any consequence in the system were those specific asteroids.

Decision? The consensus cascade which followed ended with a very detailed self-administered protocol.

{Everyone knows what to do. Let's act somewhat efficiently for once,} called Captain into the general intranet matrixes.

Sensors carefully completed intensive sweeps of the emissions of the bolonite, delving deeply into the fabric of space-time, looking for potential rips and thin spots. Meanwhile, Delta readied a series of minithrusters in preparation of physical asteroid retrieval; tractor beams frequencies had the slight possibility of initiating adverse resonance. Weapons inspected weaponry and conducted readiness drills, just in case. Captain and Second rode herd on the actions while both Doctor and Assimilation performed their routine hierarchy tasks.

The paranoia came to nothing.

Engineering hierarchy drones, including Delta A, transported to seven different target asteroids within a five kilometer sphere, along with a quantity of building material and thruster motors. Within two days, the last of the relatively small rocks (in comparison to others in the system) were maneuvered into Bulk Cargo Hold #3 under zero gee conditions. Securement procedures accomplished, gravity was re-established.

During the entire complicated ordeal, only two drones had to visit Doctor. The first damaged body suit and the flesh underneath beyond the ability of nanite regeneration after the plasma torch she had been using to carve her designation in the face of an asteroid encountered a pocket of highly reactive material. Delta chewed that particular drone out the whole time Doctor worked, as the explosion had lent the target an annoying jig in addition to its already oscillating spin. The second had a crushed prosthesis after getting a limb caught between rocks during securement procedures.

Careful examination of the system uncovered no clues as to the reason behind the actions of species #8511, but a new vector of travel was established.

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Lieutenant Carla Franson, night shift duty officer of the engineering department, impatiently stared at the display, watching telltales light up as various gel packs linkages were physically rerouted. Just like day shift, specifically her boss, chief engineer Lieutenant Commander David Riley, to leave actual work for the off-hour crew. Carla hated it, but she did her best on the theory that one point in the distant future she might be elevated into a life which didn't have her eating breakfast at 1900.

"Ensign G'lok!" called Carla over the internal communication system, "You connected those packs in backwards sequence. Go back and do it again."

"Yes, sir," returned the sullen reply, followed by a curse as the ensign in question clunked his head against the top of a Jeffries tube.

Carla Franson was a human in her mid-thirties. Because of the low gravity colony world she had grown up on before fleeing the boonies for the excitement of Terra and Starfleet, she was exceptionally tall. Dark black hair braided in a tail complimented green eyes, which continued to glare with hostility at the terminal screen. A thin scar which started at brow line, continuing down the right side of her face only to disappear into the turtleneck of the Section 31 uniform, added to her unique character. Carla refused to tell how or where she obtained the scar, although the more astute knew it had appeared in her first year at the Academy, during a vacation period.

"Ensign G'lok! Those packs are still out of order. The PADD clearly states the sequence, so why aren't you connecting them right?"

"With all due respect, sir, but some a**hole from the day shift appears to have labeled the packs wrong to begin with. I'm going to have to test each one separately before I can put them in correct sequence; and this stupid excuse for an access point isn't making it any easier."

"Understood."

Three days out from DS3, Carla had gone to her shift only to discover "adjustments" had to be made on the hardware and deflector protocols installed at the station. It seemed the paranoid bastards in charge had made the tech crew at DS3 set up everything wrong in order to misguide "potential hostile forces". Now the engineering crew had to tear everything apart in order to reinstall it the way it was supposed to be in the first place. And guess which shift had the duty of crawling around in the bowels of the ship and climbing over the exterior hull?

"Franson to Klark...you got that hose connected yet?"

"I hate the hull! My stomach gets all queasy, and feeling like I'm going to fall into the stars doesn't help any," replied the voice of Crewman Harry Klark.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes. I'm cycling the airlock to return inside now."

Scut work, that's all night shift was used for. Scut work the day shift didn't want to do because they might get their pretty hands dirty.

Jad gave a big smile at chief engineer Riley, then asked, "Everything all ready?"

"Yes, sir. Took a bit of effort, but we got everything straightened out the way the briefing diagrams stated. All tests on the system are a go; we are ready to begin." Dave stood half-turned from the display which was showing data from engineering. "If I may, sir, can I return to Engineering?"

"Permission granted," said Jad, trying to sound like his personal idol Jean-Luc Picard, but failing in the estimate of the others on the bridge. Dave nodded, then disappeared into the turbolift.

"We going to blow things up now?" called Commander Charlotte Burns from the tactical station. She had displaced Lieutenant Commander Vince DiSanto, who was now loitering nearby, obviously wanting to object to the action, but not caring to call too much attention to himself.

At the helm, Lieutenant Commander Ben Rachow began to giggle under his breath.

"What is so funny, Mr. Rachow?" asked Jad.

"Charlotte is going to blow things...up!" Ben guffawed louder at his innuendo, then abruptly stopped as an asteroid glanced off the shields, shaking the ship. "Whoops. Maybe I should take it out of cruise control now."

"Maybe you should," muttered Charlotte loudly, entertaining notions of a certain helmsman caught in the crosshairs of the weapon targeting systems.

Jad spun slightly in his chair, looking over towards Dr. Liz Lang at the science console. Resting on a nearby chair, doing his best at imitating a rabid tribble, lay Zeke the hamster. "Checklist complete, Doctor?"

"Well, as Riley said, the machinery and electronics are ready. I've reconfigured the sensors to outline on the screen the various rocks in the system with different colors based on composition. The protocol has us shooting each type of rock we can see once and only once with the deflector beam. We simply scan the results and see what, if anything, happens."

"Will it," glare at Ben, "explode?" asked Charlotte.

"If either us or the rock explodes, there was a slight problem. It's not supposed to do that. The beam is supposed to turn the top layer of any material into a substance which interferes with the Borg subspace communication frequencies."

Charlotte looked disappointed, then turned to Vince, "Here, you can do tactical after all." Vince quickly retook his place, before Commander Burns decided to change her mind again. He reset a few controls, then looked at Dr. Lang for instructions.

On the main screen, the rocks of the Jurian system serenely glided. A Section 31 target range and weapon testing ground, many of the asteroids showed signs of phaser and torpedo scars. One rock, out of sight but not out of sensor range, glowed with a weird purple color; no one wanted to know why, and that particular oddity had been given plenty of room when Banshee had arrived. Other than that, everything appeared normal. The screen altered slightly as multicolored halos shimmered into existence around the asteroids in visual range.

"Ready to proceed with the tests, Captain."

"Make it so."

The crew behind Jad rolled their eyes.

Several of the engineering night crew had gathered in Carla's quarters. She had tapped into the bridge displays, as well as several key engineering consoles, the output of which had been rerouted to her room. They were now sitting on couches, watching the action, and griping.

"This had to take place during day shift, of course," growled G'lok, an odd mixture of Klingon and Andorian features. No one yet had managed to bring forth the courage to ask him how his parents met long enough for G'lok to be made.

Carla rolled her eyes, then sipped on her coffee, "What did you expect? Bridge staff are all daytimers anyway. There...see...after that last use of the deflector, power expenditure in the plasma system shot up 59%."

"And our patches held," stated Loth, a young Vulcan. "However, the patch in conduit three beta is showing signs of weakening."

"Day shift losers! That was their assignment area!" crowed G'lok. No one argued, mostly because all agreed.

The door to the quarters opened, and in trotted Crewman Harry Klark, trailed by his dog Blackie. He held up a bottle while the animal immediately went to Loth. The Vulcan began to sneeze.

"All right!" yelled Carla, "You got it!"

"Romulan Ale. Had to fast talk Peter in the Twilight Zone," returned Harry with a smirk as he referred to the bartender, "but I did get it. The real stuff, too, not the replicated drivel."

"Go away *sneeze* Blackie *sneeze*. I do not appreciate *sneeze* your presence *cough*," calmly said Loth as his allergies kicked in.

Harry handed the alcohol to Carla. "Oops, sorry Loth, I didn't think you'd be here. Blackie, bad girl! To the corner!" The dog whined, cast a longing look at Loth, then went to the other side of the room. The sneezing immediately slowed.

G'lok pointed, "Look, they are targeting some bolonite asteroids now. Last time they used a weapon like this on ore like that, Secondprize ended up playing with a Borg cube. Guess who will get the blame if something like that happens again?"

Carla wickedly grinned as she took a sip of the Romulan Ale, "Why, night shift of course. After all, aren't we the 'lunkheads that didn't correctly align the antiproton emission array' last month, never mind the fact it was chief-boy Riley himself who didn't give us the correct specs to follow?"

Laughter (except from Loth) was the answer.

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In the darkness which was Bulk Cargo Hold #3, seventy thousand light years distant from a certain Federation ship, a rock began to glow slightly; specifically, half engraved numerical of a Borg designation burned a translucent blue. Unstable lambda particles, liberated via the heat of a plasma torch and stressed by an artificial gravity field, began a chain reaction. The instability quickly spread throughout the entire asteroid, then "infected" the other six rocks clustered nearby.

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Dr. Lang's team had finished analyzing the scan results of the target rocks. As expected, the outcome was a big negative. It seemed the test of the BIC protocol was a success, at least

against inert space junk. To be more exact, nothing had blown up and no unusual phenomenon had surfaced.

If at that point all had been left alone, if Starfleet and Section 31 admirals and other desk-bound administration had a crystal ball locked onto the "Future Channel", things might have been different. Galactic peace would have been inevitable, hunger and disease wiped out, and a cure found for those annoying kids who kick the back of your seat at the movie theater. Well...such a Golden Age was coming with or without Section 31 meddling, just the Federation might not envision it the way reality was currently shaping, mainly because the Federation wasn't in the picture at all.

No, while the Future Channel looked gloomy for the Federation, in hindsight (foresight? Temporal tenses are confusing.) it was the Federation which caused the black clouds. The powers-that-be should have called for the next part of the test from Section 31 headquarters to be torn up, causing a paradox to be born, and suddenly the Federation's version of a Golden Age would have sprung to reality. But no crystal ball was available, so the timeline marched on.

"BIC protocol testing procedure, part two. If nothing unexpected happens..." read Dr. Lang to herself as she sipped on her tea, eyes flicking down the multitudes of technobabble filling the screen of her personal terminal.

The Banshee fired, beam from the deflector dish lancing out to impact a pockmarked rock. Nothing happened, just as nothing had happened the previous fifteen times.

"Report," stated Jad, nervousness wearing off as repetitive boredom took over.

"Nothing?" answered Ben helpfully from helm, turning to leer at Liz.

Liz ignored the helmsman, instead speaking quietly to ever-present Zeke, "That's a good boy. That's right. Think of the changes castration does to the human male." Then louder, "Nothing, Captain."

"Right. Um, tell me again why we are doing this?"

Sighed Dr. Lang, "Because, if you bothered to read the test update this morning, our superiors wanted to rule out the possibility of double shots of the BIC protocol causing the previously seen anomaly. After all, it would kinda reek to not be able to hit a target twice without tearing through space and time."

"But I thought there was no possibility of it happening with the adjustments that had been made to the hardware, at least that's what I read at the beginning of the report."

"And you believed that?"

"Well," said Jad, "now that you mention it, no. Are we almost done?"

"Yes. Mr. DiSanto, please target that green rock with orange highlights."

Vince peered at the screen, then down at his console, directing the computer to target the nickel-iron-basalt asteroid. Another pair of beams shot from the dish.

"Damn it!" shouted Carla as she wielded the plasma soldering iron, trying to melt a patch on a conduit within an awkwardly placed bulkhead panel. The Jefferies tube was hot from the energies being forced through the local systems, heat waste product parboiling everything nearby. Carla's arm slipped again, causing a small short to arc from exposed wire to her sleeve, frying every hair underneath to a golden brown. "Can't you hold that patch a bit more firmly?"

"I'm trying the best I can," stated Klark. "Is it my fault the work the day crew did was shoddy?"

"No, but it is your fault I'm frying my arm." A pair of quick welds finished the task.

Carla consulted her PADD. "Okay, what's next?" The night crew had been held over from the last shift to help with the ongoing repair of deflector systems stressed as they tried to perform at energy levels for which they had not been designed. The overload, in turn, tended to affect every other system even remotely associated. Guess who got the fun of worming through the Jefferies tubes as day shift coordinated the tests happening concurrently? Night shift, of course.

"Lieutenant," yelled Klark as he scrambled backwards down the tube, "I'd move if I were you! They are going to shoot another asteroid! The patch will probably hold, but I wouldn't want to be where you are if it doesn't!"

"Damn!" complained Carla again as she slipped after the crewman, wiping the sweat off her brow with an already sodden sleeve.

"Double firing on the bolonite rock now, Dr. Lang," said Vince as he lined the experimental weapon on yet another spinning rock.

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Seven secured asteroids of various tonnages began to glow brighter, but sensors for a particular Borg ship were shifted outwards, following a dying trail of exotic subspace wake particles. And even if Cube #347 had not been busy, what would be the purpose of spending precious sensor time watching inert space rocks?

At one end of the galaxy, a potential door of unstable lambda particles burrowed into the fabric of space, slipping through the lattices of space like a needle through cloth. If no potentiality had existed within range of the lambda excursion - range being approximately one hundred thousand light years - then stability would have set in once more. As it was, a second potentiality poked into a location relatively near the first; as a negative magnetic pole seeks the positive, an uncontrolled and very precarious connection was made.

On one end, a mass approximating twelve tons disappeared into seeming nothingness. On the other end, 175 random sentient beings, several pets, and one very surprised plant similarly evaporated. A space of five milliseconds later, both groups reappeared in real space, but at opposite termini of the potentialities.

Only one species had ever managed to harness the power of "lambda hopping", and they lived in the Andromeda galaxy, happy in their role as a race of cargo carriers. Wholly by accident, two more civilizations had now stumbled upon one of the faster methods of supralight traveling, provided bolonite-mediated potentialities existed at the point one wished to go. One, however, was oblivious, concentrating on the external environment; the other had absolutely no idea what the hell had just happened.

Therefore, on one Borg ship known as Exploratory-class Cube #347, twelve tons of living flesh (and cellulose) appeared as a giant dog-pile, bolonite ore dust raining down to sprinkle on the stunned group. Seventy thousand light years distant, on the decks of a Federation starship named Banshee, twelve tons of asteroid rubble neatly piled on the chairs, work stations, and quarters said organisms had occupied milliseconds prior.

As suddenly as the instability in the fabric of space had ripped, it healed itself. The universe was not uncaring, it simply had a rather twisted sense of black humor.

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"Get off me!" called a muffled voice.

"Ouch, your foot is in my face!"

"Your face? What about my fingers?"

Sound of a hand impacting a cheek at a velocity approaching high impulse, then: "Touch me there again, Ben, and I'll make sure you eat that limb for lunch."

"Woof!" whined a black dog.

"There's a plant on my head!"

"Who sat on my hamster? You okay Zeke?"

Slowly the pile of black-clad humanoids (plus two dogs, a parrot, a hamster, and one miniature Altarian palm) sorted themselves out. Many comments were said, many curses uttered, but in the end, 175 of the Banshee crew had arrayed themselves about seven very large rocks. The light was eerily dim, but it was still bright enough to see very confused faces.

Jad brushed the dust off his arms, tugged his shirt straight, then shouted, "Everyone, listen to me!" No one listened. Jad tried again, "Listen to me, or else I'll sic Counselor Emily on you!" Everyone shut up.

By having everyone sit on the ground as if it were story time in kindergarten, the chaos was slowly controlled. No one still knew what had happened or where they were, but no one was wandering off into dark, scary areas either. Shortly it had been determined that of command staff, Vorezze, Burns, Rachow, DiSanto, Dr. Lang, Smith, and Riley were present. Most of the night shift of engineering was attendant as well, plus about fifty security crew. The rest were from various departments.

"Okay," said Jad to the rest of the huddled command staff, "first thing...we gotta figure out where we are."

"Lost?" ventured Dan Smith. The Lieutenant Commander had been in the Twilight Zone having a relaxing drink when the translocation had happened. Now the vaguely fruity smelling liquid was all over the front of his shirt.

Dr. Lang was busily taking some basic readings on her tricorder, which had been in a pocket. Zeke perched on her shoulders, peering down at the instrument, occasionally making small chirping sounds as the tricorder beeped. "Um...Captain? We have a problem."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Our environmental readings. 92% humidity, 39.1 degrees Celsius," Liz continued with the parameters. "That ring any bells?"

"It is hot and sticky? I already knew that." Pause. "And if you make any comments, Ben, I will have to hurt what little brains you have."

Ben said nothing, although a slight smirk crossed his face. The smirk turned to a grimace of pain seconds later.

Jad stopped glaring at his helmsman, "Now, Doctor, what is it supposed to mean?"

"Pardon for butting in, sir," interrupted Charlotte as she wiped a bit of sweat off her nose ring, "but that is the climate of a Borg cube."

"Oops."

Over the next two hours, the Banshee crew managed to busy themselves. Although everyone expected for Borg to rush in and assimilate them any second, activities did get accomplished. For one thing, the area they were in was immense...one could probably fit an entire Defiant-class ship in what appeared to be a cargo hold, with room to spare. The lighting level did not change, but as vision adapted, it could be seen that more than seven large rocks

were secured within. There were bulk metals, spools of wires, miscellaneous barrels....

"Are you sure we can eat this, Doctor? It looks like a ration bar."

Dr. Lang rolled her eyes, "As we appear to be missing a medical doctor, I guess I have to do. It has been a long time since basic anatomy at the Academy, but I think I remember everything right." Jad stared at her. "I'm kidding. There are three of the medical staff in the group, and they confirmed it is edible. Yes, it looks like a ration bar, but I guarantee it won't poison you. We managed to get one of the dogs to eat one, and it didn't barf or fall over dead, at least not yet."

"But what would the Borg need with ration bars? Wait, I don't think I want to know. Well, at least that takes care of one problem." Jad managed to stop the comment he was going to make about eating cavy before it was uttered. "Good job, Doctor."

"I don't believe butthead-Riley did that to us," complained G'lok vigorously. "I don't believe he did that!"

"That" in question had occurred just a few minutes ago. The night shift of engineering had been huddled by a wall, discussing their assigned task: the manufacturing of a functional loo. Then, Mister Lieutenant Commander David Riley had sauntered up to Lieutenant Franson to give her some news; unfortunately, the news was quite audible.

"Lieutenant, since most of the night shift has managed to be, um, located here, I thought it would be best if I volunteered your and their services for a certain duty. After all, you all are used to working together."

"What duty, sir?" asked Carla suspiciously.

"I've consulted with the captain and Burns, and they agree. We think that if we manage to tap into the exterior communication net of this cube, we might be able to send a message to the Federation. Of course, first we'll have to determine where we are located in the cube, which will tell us if we are close enough to the hull to try subspace. Naturally, there is no way to directly talk to the Federation, but the equivalent of a scream would suffice to say we are alive."

"And night shift's duty, sir?"

"I'm pretty sure we can do all that without alerting the hive. Security poking their noses outside the hold area haven't see many drones, and those that are there are ignoring us."

"And the duty, /sir?"

"Oh, sorry. You'll lead the night shift out into the corridors looking for evidence of where we are in the cube; and see if you can determine what the communication system might look like."

And now: "I agree *cough*, Lieutenant Commander Riley doesn't always seem to take into account the safety *sneeze* of the duties we get assigned."

"Blackie, come!" snapped Klark. The dog whined as he moved away from Loeth's side and back to his owner. "Here, chew on this." A ration bar was handed to the animal, who settled down to worry at it like a chew toy.

"Stop your complaining. The faster we get this done, the sooner we can get back here," returned Carla. "We meet at the main cargo hold doorway in five minutes. Be sure you each get one of the tricorders from the requisition pile."

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{Sensors, can't the tracking be done without rerouting the grid through your personal

sensory system?} complained Captain as he was enveloped in the scent of a rotting carcass. Although the odor disappeared as heading was adjusted slightly, the sensation lingered.

{Sensors apologizes, but the computer is useless with the degree of [purple apples] required in the delicate process of following this [funeral]. The organic brain within this drone is much more adept, and, when combined with the power of Sensors' hierarchy, more [allergic] than any algorithm.}

Captain geeshed, {You don't have to be so sarcastic.} There was a nagging virtual itch, one not associated with Sensors or her annoying hallucinations, which had been bugging Captain the last several cycles. As he had done previously, he ran through the basic awareness patterns of the drones not in regeneration, trying to determine if one or more was overtly trying to hide some thought or action. Nothing.

The stationary humanoid forms which appeared several times in the visual field of drones near Bulk Cargo Hold #3 were dismissed as being irrelevant. After all, how could the unassimilated get on the cube undetected?

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Dave quietly talked with those few of day shift which had been translated to the Borg ship, totally oblivious to the glares of hatred emanating from the knot of tired night shift. The people who had risked assimilation talked among themselves, then, without a backward glance, left for the part of the hold which had been designated as a sleeping area. It had been a long couple of days.

"You think we're ready?" asked Dave to Ensign Juliana Carter. The latter nodded her head, gesturing at the mess of spliced wires which connected to a series of dissected combadges and commandeered Borg hardware with blinking yellow lights.

"Yes," the ensign replied. "According to Lieutenant Franson, those wires appear to be part of the communication system; and with those combadges, we can send something akin to Morse code. The Borg stuff is a signal amplifier, I think. At least it looks familiar. At the very least, it should disguise our attempts to the hive, making it seem like random power fluctuations." The young woman looked earnest to prove her worth. Too bad her brilliant kind rarely survived service in Starfleet unless they managed to be quickly promoted out of the ranks of the expendable, or accepted work in the private sector.

Dave looked in the direction of the captain, chewing his lip. Vorezze was asleep near the rocks. Burns was nearby, vainly trying to chew a ration bar while fending off the attentions of a small white dog. "I think we'll give it a little test beep, then inform the captain later if all is okay. Too embarrassing to get hopes up if it doesn't work."

Carter shrugged, then reached for the combadges. She tapped the faces of the badges a few times in a classic S-O-S pattern.

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To say Dave, or any member of engineering, knew what they were doing would have been an understatement. Federation fiddling with the wires and junctions within the interstitial space of the cargo hold was equivalent to a troop of baboons trying to figure out why a car wouldn't start. A solution might be found, but probabilities gave better odds that the infinite monkeys at their infinite typewriters would get the Bard's works typed first.

The night shift had not correctly identified the system associated with subspace communication.

Cube #347 abruptly dropped out of transwarp into full impulse. It rotated until face #5 was directed towards the direction of travel. A series of noncentralized deflectors buried in the hull of the large vessel powered up, then proceeded to emit energized chromaton particles.

The Borg ship disappeared from view, departing the current timeline in a wake of white sparkles which were randomly mangling local tau vectors. The universe held its breath.

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The cube performed an emergency stop, tumbling out of transwarp to impulse. Sensor whiplash as the external environment suddenly altered spread the suffering of headache throughout the sub-collective. Before further actions could be taken, the deflectors on face #5 activated, belching a spasm of uncontrolled chromaton particles into the path of the cube. Through the temporal rent Cube #347 hurled, unable to change course.

<< AHHHHH! >> screamed the sub-collective as the roller-coaster ride commenced.

{Nifty fractal effect distortions!} exclaimed a single voice.

As the cube emerged back into the blackness of interstellar space, Captain gained control of propulsion, bringing the ship to a complete halt. A quick scan of recent command codes recorded a rogue pathway, triggering protocols of temporal excursion. Unfortunately, not all parameters had been correctly completed; in fact, several blanks were pure gibberish, and it was unknown where in time the cube had been shot.

Sensors began to target positions of navigation pulsars while Delta dispatched repair crews to take care of damage accrued in the drop out of transwarp followed by the unexpected temporal translation. The report from the sensor hierarchy, when it came a short time later, was not unexpected: the sub-collective was far, far in the past. So far, in fact, the Borg Collective appeared to not exist.

It was unsettling to say the least. They had to get back, but without knowing the exact temporal distance needed to return, using the chromaton protocol was extremely dangerous. And there was the little fact Delta was now reporting extensive damage to the deflectors along face #5, as well as the total depletion of chromaton reserves as quantum-magnetic bottle containment fields had collapsed.

"Sh**," stated Captain verbally. {Second, section yourself a working partition and get preliminary consensus on possible actions to take.}

Second grumbled a typical sarcastic reply, then distanced himself and three hundred mentalities of the command and control hierarchy from the general sub-collective.

Next task...tracking down the cause of the rogue command and eliminating it.

Tendrils of his mentality following the actions throughout the cube, Captain began to trace the temporal command, growing increasingly curious as the pathway wound through the dataspaces like a drunken Mobius worm. From the deflectors, the command bounced across propulsion, then trickled along communications, and finally retreated to environmental controls. The input appeared to not have come from a drone signature, but a physical access point in Bulk Cargo Hold #3.

{Sensors!} yelled Captain as he pulled himself from the tracing program, {Relent internal grid control to Bulk Cargo Hold #3. All drones currently located in subsection #21, report unusual sentient activity. Doctor, this had better not be another Vyst incident, else I'm going to

leave you drifting out in vacuum and rotate 1 of 27 into the head of drone maintenance.}

The first to respond was Doctor. As he carefully piled equipment in front of his latest project, an aquarium filled with oddly gray fish analogues, he replied, {No Vysts, Captain. There is nothing that I have done that could possibly cause problems on the cube.}

Captain was suspicious, to say the least, but in such an emergency Doctor would not hold back vital information. Power redirected to local internal sensors in Bulk Cargo Hold #3 caught Captain's attention as input commenced; Doctor's transgressions would have to hold until a future date.

Disregarding his viewscreen for the moment, Captain gazed down from a distant ceiling, taking in multiple feeds at once, compiling them into a whole view. Far below, humanoid figures moved with purpose. Audio sensors caught the language of...the Federation. Although the uniform was not known, closer examination revealed the species known to be members of the Alpha quadrant; two quadrupedal creatures could be seen frolicking, as well as an avian and a small plant. At the base of a wall an open panel was noted, a cable emerging from it and connecting to a contraption. Three people stood nearby.

"Sorry sir, but it didn't seem to work. The Borg part Ensign Carter incorporated is toast." A male voice.

"But do the Borg know what we tried?" spoke a second figure which glanced over his shoulder as if fearing imminent attack.

"If they did, sir, I don't think we would be having this conversation. Carter here thinks she can try again." The first voice again.

"Yes, sir," said a female voice of the third member of the trio, "there is some Borg hardware behind that panel over there. One of the modules looks like a subspace booster." That figure pointed to a position approximately six meters to the left of the open panel.

Captain broke into Second's deliberations, {We have a bigger problem. I need all of you for a sub-collective-wide consensus.}

Decision made, it was time to proceed. In effect, Captain wanted to preserve all possible avenues of opportunity. It had been a close call to simply transport an overwhelming force into Bulk Cargo Hold #3 and assimilate everyone, but in the end the consensus agreed to build a vast containment field about the entire hold area and imprison the Federation vermin. There was no such system already set up, but installation would not take very long.

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"He did it again," griped Carla to the assembled members of the night shift. All forty-five grumbled; a few craned their necks to look over towards quietly gossiping command staff. Riley appeared to be unaware of the muffled curses and inventive ancestral comparisons being spoken with his name as the primary subject.

Crewman Joe Hansen, an older man whose hair was gradually turning gray, asked, "What is it this time? We supposed to go out and find some mythical bridge to take control of this sucker? Or have we simply been told build a new Banshee out of the spare Borg parts lying around?"

"Of course not. Building a starship would be too easy. No, we are supposed find Borg dataports and download all the information we can. Hopefully there will be info concerning galactic location and perhaps the specs of some of the 'spare Borg parts' in the walls, enough so

day shift can build a transmitter that actually works. Assuming the data can be translated, of course."

"I'd like to..." begun G'lok.

"Enough of this inefficiency!" belted Carla in a command tone. "We have enough concerns to deal with at the moment. Eighteen of the shift will go out to the corridors now. When we get back in six hours, another eighteen will assume the duty. The other nine will continue with duties in the hold. I suggest those that don't pull the first trip out concentrate on getting some sleep. I have a list already made up." Carla pulled a PADD out of her pocket and began to read off names.

* * * * *

Drones of the engineering hierarchy moved with purpose in the corridors adjacent to Bulk Cargo Hold #3. At set intervals panels were removed from the bulkhead closest to the common wall shared, limbs reaching into interstitial spaces to install force field emitters. Federation clad humanoids in unusual uniforms of complete black scurried in the corridors, avoiding drones as they walked by.

3 of 19: {I see another one. How could we have missed them before? They are so obvious.}

108 of 230: {That one has a phaser! I don't want to get hit by a phaser.}

Weapons: {Wimp. The pain will not last long.}

130 of 230: {What happens if they figure out what we are doing? I can see a pair coming towards me, and they have tricorders. I will have to move for them...what do I do?}

Delta: {Don't look at them, 130 of 230! Don't acknowledge their existence! Make them give way! That goes for all assigned to the task - do nothing to let them realize we are aware of them and they will continue to act as if they are ignoring us. Take no hostile actions.}

Weapons: {Wimp way out.}

Delta: {Shush, Weapons. Don't influence my hierarchy; and keep your trigger-happy drones out of the way.}

* * * * *

The pairs and trios of the Banshee engineering night shift nervously scuttled from corner to corner, catwalk to catwalk, corridor to corridor, attempting to look as inoffensive as possible. Before they had embarked on the latest in dangerous extrahold assignments, Lieutenant Franson had carefully pounded into every head: "Pretend they don't exist beyond being a roadblock. They will pretend you don't exist right back." It helped Franson was sharing in the duty, instead of issuing orders from the relative safety of the cargo bay.

It appeared, after several breathless watch rotations, the hive had not noticed the disastrous attempt to "phone home" using the cube's own subspace communication system. Therefore, Captain Vorezze had declared information on location and technology to be of highest importance, so the "volunteered" engineering night shift once again set out, risking body and self.

All this meant little to Loeth and G'lok as they carefully scrambled along a corridor, tricorders rapidly sweeping back and forth, looking for an unused dataport. There appeared to be greater drone activity in the vicinity than earlier, but the Borg continued to be oblivious to the

unassimilated in their midst. Several seemed to be working on installing some kind of emitter deep in the bulkhead walls, but neither of the pair felt like walking up and asking what was going on.

G'lok sniffed, "It stinks out here. And I think the heat is more oppressive in these corridors than the hold."

"The heat is exactly the same, plus zero-point-two Celsius to allow for less air circulation compared to the hold. The humidity is slightly higher out here, however. We are both evolved for dry heat, not wet." Locth replied as he watched the display of his tricorder.

"Bah...I can withstand anything! What I don't like is not fighting."

"Be logical. They will eventually adapt to anything we use. Our less than two hundred arrayed against an estimated several thousand would not last long, especially on their home ground."

"I didn't say fighting was the right choice, I just said I don't like not fighting. Hey, I think I found a data junction." G'lok stopped in front of a dusty pillar, located between two obviously unused alcoves. Three Borg were traveling down the hallway, two from the right and one from the left. They would cross approximately the area Locth and G'lok were located.

"I think we should get out of the way," stated Locth as he looked around. "If we each get into one of those alcoves, the Borg will pass us. Afterwards we can see if we can retrieve any data from the port."

G'lok looked to his right and left, watching the oncoming drones, then examined the alcoves. "Standing in one of those Borg things is too freaky, but if I must, I will."

"It is logical."

"Fine. But afterwards I want to have a long talk with you about the logic of being out here in the first place."

The pair shared a look that said logic was irrelevant in that particular case, then fit themselves into the dusty alcoves.

* * * * *

Delta called to Captain over the net, {We are done, Captain. All internal containment emitters are installed.}

{Very good,} returned Captain. He took a few moments to review the power pathways of the emitters, although he had perfect faith everything was correct. Satisfied, Captain next pinpointed the location of the Federation people moving outside the confines of Bulk Cargo Hold #3. Eighteen beings on the loose, potentially muddling the systems worse than that already done; well, there was no other way to deal with it....

{Drones in subsection #21, submatrices 4 through 17, converge on Bulk Cargo Hold #3. Capture and assimilate all tagged sophonts outside the containment area.} Captain visualized the location of the Federation teams within the metallic maze of the cube, following the order with the command codes to activate the force fields.

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G'lok and Locth were immensely surprised as the trio of Borg did not walk past the two alcoves, instead stopping and turning to regard the pair. G'lok managed to squeak out an "Oh, sh**" before assimilation tubules pierced his neck. His Vulcan comrade didn't even have that

opportunity.

In the area exterior to the cargo hold, the night shift engineering teams were swiftly located and dispatched. Those that realized the Borg drones were no longer oblivious managed to fire one or two shots from their phasers, but that protection was too little too late as personal shielding, already primed to deal with Federation weaponry, swiftly adapted.

Carla and her partner Ensign Terri Provost, a young Terran who had recently "died" and been reassigned to the Section 31 Banshee, fled down the hallway. The Borg tended to not move quickly, but then again, there was no need: there was nowhere to run and hide in the closed environment of a cubeship. Terri turned, blocking the corridor, phaser raised.

"Run, sir...I'll delay them as long as I can. I think we're really close, but we both won't make it unless someone runs rear-guard. Someone needs to warn the captain about the Borg offensive."

Carla did not argue, instead continuing her headlong pelt down the hallway, leaving the idealistic ensign behind to her doom. Such pragmatism, had any upper ranks been there to observe, would have instantly gained her a promotion, if only because she had no qualms about leaving expendable crewmen behind. Carla was out to save her own butt.

A reaching pair of limbs was avoided about the time the scream from Terri sounded behind, abruptly cutting off. The cargo hold was ahead...just ahead...a (puff) few (wheeze) hundred meters (pant) away. No Borg appeared to be directly ahead, so maybe she could live a few more minutes among the others, before the hive rushed the bay, that was. A clank in a corridor she was passing caused a surge of adrenaline to lift weariness away.

Zap! Carla bounced off a force field and fell to the deck, scraping an elbow and tearing a rip along her pants. As she scrambled to her feet, she realized a barrier stretched across the open door between the corridor and the cargo hold, a thin electromagnetic obstacle that stood between her and false safety. After a look behind into the darkness, which was feeling like a really bad horror movie, except a lot less laughable when one held the starring role, Carla began to ineffectively pound against the field, yelling for someone in the milling mass inside to hear her.

A mottled gray hand with six digits clamped on her shoulder, and she felt no more.

* * * * *

The crew of the Banshee within the bowels of Bulk Cargo Hold #3 reacted with shock as containment fields wavered into existence. The egresses were shielded, as were every opening into the areas behind the bulkhead panels. Even the floor, under deck plating, became inaccessible. Looking up, Jad inanely suspected that if crew managed to clamber to the ceiling, they would find a field there too.

After shock came dismay, as realization swiftly sunk in that the Borg knew the Banshee crew was on board. "We are going to die!" began to echo from person to person. At the blocked main doorway, an unknown humanoid shape appeared; it was quickly joined by another dark shadow, then both melted away into the black corridors beyond. Before Jad could conquer his own fear and begin his duty as captain to spread the propaganda of false comfort, a dreaded Voice began to echo ominously throughout the hold:

"We are Borg. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated."

Here ends Part One of "Cube #347's Excellent Adventure". Be sure to continue reading Part Two of what is swiftly becoming an epic adventure.